

Telling his or her story through reflective journals

Nooreiny Maarof

Faculty of Education, National University of Malaysia (UKM) noreiny@pkrisc.cc.ukm.my

This study examined the reflective journal entries of 42 trainee teachers who underwent teaching practicum in schools in Malaysia. The study investigated the types of reflections, strategies or stance used, and perceptions of the trainees toward reflective journal writing. The findings of the study indicated that the trainee teachers were engaged in Descriptive Reflection (DR), Dialogic Reflection (DIAR), Descriptive Writing (DW) and Critical Reflection (CR), respectively. In their summary of the journal writing experience, approximately 77 per cent of the trainees stated that the task assisted them in evaluating their teaching methods, strengths and weaknesses, awareness of their own teaching, problems in teaching, and identifying materials and aids for their teaching. An implication of the study is to provide explicit training of the use of reflective journals in teacher training. In addition, practising teachers should be encouraged to use reflective journal writing as part of their daily professional teaching experience.

teacher trainee, reflective journals, reflective writing, strategies, reflection

INTRODUCTION

Education has never been more challenging and pertinent than in today's global world. It is considered as one of the most important factors in the development of a nation (Cobb, Darling-Hammond, and Murangi, 1995). Therefore, the education and preparation of teachers is a critical issue in national development. The demand for quality teachers has become the goal of teacher preparation programs around the world (Cobb, 1999). Attributes of quality teachers include possessing "pedagogical knowledge, subject content knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary for effective teaching, strong understanding of human growth and child development, effective communication skills, strong sense of ethics, and capacity for renewal and ongoing learning" (Cobb, 1999, p. 1). In light of these developments, there is a revival of interest in teacher preparation programs to foster and develop perspectives and practise focusing on reflective practice (Boud and Walker, 1998; Hatton and Smith, 1995; Schon, 1987).

Reflective practice as defined by Richards and Lockhart (1997) refers to an approach to teaching where "teachers and student teachers collect data about teaching, examine their attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and teaching practices" (p. 1) and the data are then used further to reflect critically about teaching. In addition, they point out that to explore teaching, novice and experienced teachers must have techniques and strategies with the following underlying assumptions about teacher development.

1. An informed teacher has an extensive knowledge base about teaching.
2. Much can be learned about teaching through self-inquiry.
3. Much of what happens in teaching is unknown to the teacher.
4. Experience is insufficient as a basis for development.
5. Critical reflection can trigger a deeper understanding of teaching.

Schon (1987) in his AERA address "Educating the Reflective Practitioner", construes reflective practice as a process of "refining one's artistry or craft in a specific discipline" (Ferraro, 1999, p. 1). He suggested that reflective practice should be used to assist novices in a discipline to see parallels between their own practices and that of experts. Schon defined reflective practice as thinking through one's own experiences putting knowledge to practice while under the supervision of experienced experts in the field (cited in Ferraro, 1999). Reflective practice engaged teachers in a recurring "cycle of thought and action based on professional experience" (Wellington, 1991, p.4). Thus, reflective practice could be seen as teaching which involved constant inquiry about one's own teaching and then attempting to take a more systematic approach to practices and to work with others who had such common interests and questions as yours (Pickett, 1999).

Schon (1987) differentiates between **reflection-in-action** and **reflection-on-action**. Reflection-in-action is when a practitioner, who is often already an expert, learns to think on his or her feet and is able to improvise with new incoming information and is able to deal with the unexpected. An example Schon provides is that of people playing jazz music or of people having a good conversation. Both require spontaneity and unpredictability. Reflection-on-action involves the practitioner reflecting and contemplating on the underlying, implied understandings and assumptions that he or she has and further analyses them consciously in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of roles of the teacher and student, the motivations and behaviours in the learning context (Pickett, 1999). Schon believes that teachers' learning is the result of the actions and reflections of daily problems. He includes critical awareness as pertinent in teacher reflections. Hatton and Smith (1995) provides a succinct explication of the two types of reflection and a brief review of the various conceptions of reflection as used in a teacher education context.

In most teacher training and preparation programs, reflective practice is used at both the pre-service and in-service stages of teaching. Reflection-promoting techniques include reflective journals comprising dialog journals, peer reflection, diaries, learning logs and audio-video recordings and others (Pickett, 1999; Richards and Lockhart, 1997). Strategies that seem to help foster reflection are (a) action research projects, (b) case studies and ethnographic studies of students, teachers, classrooms and schools, (c) microteaching and other supervised practicum experiences, and (d) structured curriculum tasks (Hatton and Smith, 1995, p. 4). Bailey (1997) explored the notion of reflective teaching through her own "story" of her teaching experience. Through her vignettes of incidences in her classrooms, she saw teaching as "part of a bigger pattern, a reflection of a wider world" (Bailey, 1997, p. 7). Through her unfolding "story" the reader could share the authentic experiences of the teacher as she taught in her classroom.

This article focuses on the use of reflective journals in teaching practice of a group of teacher trainees at the Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. The aim of the article and study is to examine the nature of teacher-trainees or novice teachers' journal writing and their conceptions of journal writing. The questions driving the study include (a) What are the types of reflection as evidenced in trainees writing, (b) What are the strategies or stance used by the trainees in "telling their stories"? (c) What seems to be a common type of reflection among the trainees?, and (d) What are the trainee teachers' perceptions and understandings of reflective journal writing?

WHAT IS REFLECTION?

Perspectives on reflective thinking include ideas derived from the domains of psychology, education, philosophy, and the arts. Early philosophers and thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle and Locke contemplated and discussed the ideas on reflection or the idea of metacognition or thinking about one's thinking. The act of reflecting on one's reflection allows one to be aware of one's knowledge or cognitive strategies. Dewey (1910 cited in Shermis, 1999) proposes that we engage in reflection when we are faced with problems which do not have clear answers, or when no

authority possesses an answer, or when no answers are correct and when problems cannot be solved through mere logic. The process of reflection, according to Dewey, produces improved learning. In addition, engaging in thinking about one's practice and contemplating on thinking requires critical thinking and higher-order thinking skills. In fact, some researchers into thinking skills consider reflection as involving all levels of Bloom's Taxonomy - Cognitive Domain (Lambright, 1995 cited in Shermis, 1999). Evidently, reflection requires the "acquisition of facts, understanding of ideas, application of principles, analysis, synthesis and evaluation" (Shermis, 1999, p. 3). In education, for instance, reflection allows the teacher to learn from daily experiences by asking questions that relate to the how, why, what of teaching and learning. Reflection, therefore, is a process of thinking back about what one has done and looking for systematic ways to consciously be aware of past actions in order to amend or correct the actions for the future. In reflecting back on what the teacher has done, the teacher cannot avoid but to "tell his or her stories". As Freeman aptly points out, "To refer to what teachers know in order to teach as "stories" is not to trivialise it. In fact, much recent work in education has focused on...narrative ways of knowing..." (Freeman, 1996, p. 90, cited in Bailey, 1997, p. 2). Freeman wrote about teachers' knowledge of practice as "stories" and state that teachers know their "stories" well, but often do not know how to tell them because they have not been asked to do so or because they do not have the chance or opportunity to tell their stories. Researchers, curriculum developers, and policy makers, according to Freeman, are experts at "telling certain things about classrooms; however, they often miss the central stories that are there..." (Freeman, 1996, p. 90 cited in Bailey, 1997, p. 2). And these central stories are often precisely told by the teachers in the classrooms through their reflection on their teaching.

WHAT IS A REFLECTIVE JOURNAL?

Writing journals is a common practice within education in various fields. A reflective journal is an individual activity in that teachers commit ideas, thoughts, reflections and feelings to paper in various learning contexts (Gilmore, 1996). Reflections are also conducted orally and not transferred into written form (Farrell, 1999). And they can be either done individually or in groups. However, by nature, most reflections are done as an individual activity, and thus it requires a certain amount of self-discipline. Teachers need to set aside some time to sit back and mull over the incidents and activities which had occurred in the classroom and in the school. In writing regularly, the writers will soon discover new perspectives of particular experiences and begin to create ideas about what actions can be taken. A concise definition of reflection and of a reflective journal is not consistent in the literature (Farrell, 1999; Ferraro, 1999; Gilmore, 2001; Hatton and Smith, 1996). Some writers and researchers refer to journals as either learning logs, diaries, dialogue journals or personal narratives. Some use the terms interchangeably, however, an agreed upon characteristic of reflection is that it allows critical and in-depth analysis of what a teacher does in his or her teaching and enables him/her to decide on future corrective steps to improving practice.

The benefits of journal writing are reported in many publications and research. A common consensus on journal writing is that it offers important insights into the patterns of behaviours of the teacher and others. Journals act as windows to experiences and are learning tools which assist teachers in making sense of his or her own teaching, discover attitudes, management skills and ethical implications of teaching (Kerka, 1996; Wilheim et.al cited in Ferraro, 1999, p. 4). Effective teaching has been found to be related to "inquiry, reflection, and continuous professional growth" (Harris, 1998 cited in Ferraro, 1999, p. 4). The various forms of journals have been employed in studies examining reflection in teacher education. Dialogue journals and diaries are the more common techniques used to foster reflection (Bean and Zulich, 1989; Thorpe, 1994). However, more recently reflective journals are used in research on teacher education in the attempt to promote reflective thinking in teaching (Bailey, 1997; Gilmore, 1996; Janisek, 1999).

RESEARCH ON THE USE OF JOURNALS

Research using reflective journals include the use of journals for teaching or training purposes. Various studies on the use of journals in teaching students particular content or skills show the positive potential of using journals (Arredondo and Rucinski, 1994; Bray and Harsch, 1996; Cothern, 1991, McNamara and Deane, 1995; Smith and Pape, 1990; Sparks-Langer, Simmons, Pasch, Colton and Starko, 1990; among others).

For instance, Bray and Harsch (1996) used a reflection or review journal with their Japanese students whereby the students were asked to write down their thoughts about the class lesson. The students filled in their entries onto a worksheet, which had specific, guiding questions to help them recall on what they did, what new vocabulary they learned, and what was difficult for them in the lesson. The benefits of the journal were for both teacher and the students. The teacher found it to be a useful tool for corrective feedback, to evaluate students' progress, to improve rapport with students, and as a means of conducting action research. The learners became more aware of their role as language learners and were able to play a more active, autonomous part in developing their language learning skills (Nunan, 1988). A study by Arredondo and Rucinski (1994) incorporated reflective journals in a workshop approach for graduate and undergraduate education students at university. One of the strategies used in the workshop approach was journal writing. A total of 69 students in five classes participated in the study. The findings indicated that students had used metacognitive thinking and that the journals helped foster thinking in-depth about what and how they learned or did not learn in the lessons. Students were highly involved in their reflecting and were aware of the motivational aspects of the approach.

Studies on the use of journal writing involving reflection are not many, but those that do focus on journals found various positive effects that were of considerable potential for teacher development. Hammrich (1990) examined the differences between expert and novice teacher journal writing and found that expert teachers had more comments about the underlying elements of a lesson and the principles of instruction. Their journal entries also showed that they drew upon a richer prior knowledge base when they reflected on their lesson and teaching. The study suggested that reflective and critical self-analysis of teaching might be difficult for trainee teachers who have had little experience in the classroom. The implication to using journals as a tool in teacher education was that novice teachers should be prepared and assisted in how to reflect on their teaching.

Cook et al. (1989) investigated the effect of training in reflection on the pedagogical thinking of preservice teachers. One group was trained to conduct systematic and structured thinking on reflection whereas the other group engaged in reflection without any particular guided approach or strategy. The Taxonomy of Teacher Reflective Thinking Rating Scale was used as pretest and posttest measurements. Results, however, showed that the training alone did not cause any gain in the post-test. The structured reflective training did not seem to have a significant effect on changing the trainee teachers' pedagogical thinking.

Hatton and Smith (1995) conducted research on the use of reflective journals by 60 teacher education students (1991 and 1992 cohorts) at the University of Sydney. The study examined the effect of structured strategies and tasks students were exposed to during two coursework in the teacher education program. The coursework contained tasks and activities which could assist the student teachers with their reflection. The study investigated the types and patterns of student reflection, the fundamental nature of reflection, whether the nature of the data or evidence is affected by the types of reflection and in particular, which strategies in the courses facilitated reflection. The study cited a number of related studies that examined the effectiveness of different approaches to foster reflection in teacher education.

Reflection in the study was defined as "deliberate thinking about action with a view to its improvement" (Hatton and Smith, 1995, p.8). The study identified four types of reflective writing:

(a) descriptive writing, (b) descriptive reflection, (c) dialogic reflection, and (d) critical reflection. The first type is described as mere reporting of events or literature and is not considered reflective. The second type refers to writing which contains some form of rationale or reasons based on some evaluation or judgement. The third form is defined as writing that reflects a dialogue with the self and shows evidence of the attempt to explore possible reasons. It suggests a form of thinking aloud on paper. The fourth form is writing which involves providing reasons or justifying for "decisions or events...takes account of the broader historical, social and/or political contexts." (Hatton and Smith, 1995, p. 9).

The study found that 60 to 70 per cent of the journal writings belonged to the descriptive reflection type. The last form, critical reflection, was found to be present only in eight reports of the two cohorts of student teachers. Dialogic reflection was found to be the highest in the 1992 cohort making up 30 per cent. Another finding was that there were over-lapping types or embedded forms of reflection in the journals. For example, a student might begin with a descriptive type of reflection which later evolved into a dialogic reflection. According to the researchers, the descriptive phase acted as a preliminary attempt to establish context for what had taken place and as a starting point to set the writer's stance for a tentative, further exploration of ideas and reasons. The study also found the strategy of using so-called 'critical friend' dyads as a significant strategy that assisted students' reflective writing. The strategy allowed a student to talk, question, and discuss ideas openly in planning, implementing and evaluating one's teaching. The students in the study significantly drew upon the experience of a 'critical friend' dyad which facilitated their reflection. The study was an example of Schon's idea of 'reflection-on-action' in that deliberation on ideas and actions were conducted after the events have taken place. This finding was also supported in a study by Kettle and Sellers (1996) who found that third year teacher trainees reflection was facilitated through the use of peer reflective groups.

Gilmore (1996) conducted research on the conceptions of written journals of six lecturers who taught a teacher education course at Christchurch College of Education, New Zealand. The course required student teachers to keep a journal as a form of fostering reflection. The lecturers were asked the following questions in a half-hour interview (Gilmore, 1996, p. 3):

- What do you consider a journal to be?
- Have you ever undertaken a journal?
- What do you see as the role of journaling in teacher education?
- How do you implement journal keeping with your class?
- How do you go about evaluating your journals?

The overall results of the study showed that a majority of the lecturers concurred that journaling enabled the learners to research their own learning and practice. In addition, a salient point was that the journals revealed what and how trainee students have learnt and they enabled the students to connect theory to practice. Few studies, other than that conducted by Hatton and Smith (1995), examined the types of reflection and strategies used by trainee teachers when they wrote to reflect on their teaching. Therefore, the study we conducted on trainee teachers investigated the nature of the trainee teachers' journal writing and examined their perception of journal as used in teaching practice.

A survey conducted on the conception, perception, and practice of reflective thinking of 108 trainee teachers in the Diploma of Education program and 133 trainee teachers from the Bachelor of Education program found that there is a weak understanding of the practice of reflection among the students (Rahman, Mohd Jelas, and Osman, 1999). In addition, the practice of reflective thinking was found to be minimal and the students had inadequate exposure on reflective thinking. The results also showed a positive linear relationship between factors such as knowledge, perception and the roles of teaching practice supervisors and the practice of reflective thinking. The study suggested explicit awareness-raising of what, how, and when reflection

should be conducted prior to teaching practice; providing clear guidelines and structured tasks to student teachers, and emphasising the active participation and crucial roles of the practicum supervisors in encouraging students to reflect on teaching.

BACKGROUND

The study on the use of reflective journals in teaching practice was conducted involving 42 students (37 Female; 5 Male) who underwent teaching practice in schools in East Malaysia. The students comprised those who were in the Diploma of Education program (28 students) and the Bachelor of Education program (14 students) of the Faculty of Education at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Students in the Diploma of Education program, an eight-month training program, were in the majority, former teachers who had some teaching experience in secondary or elementary schools. The students who enrolled in the three-year Bachelors or degree program had little or no teaching experience before joining the program. Within the two programs, the students' areas of specialisation ranged from Science, Mathematics, Physical Education to Teaching English, or Arabic, or Bahasa Malaysia as a second language. The two researchers were directly involved in the supervision of the 42 students.

PROCEDURES

The students were requested to keep a reflective journal and to write their entries as often as they could. This was conveyed to them in the first week of the practicum. There was no deliberate attempt to provide any form of guidelines or strategies for the students to adhere to. They were only instructed to write in the journals about their daily teaching experiences in the classrooms and their experiences in the school they were teaching in as a whole. They were informed about the purpose of writing a journal which was deliberately to "think about action with a view to its improvement" (Hatton and Smith, 1995, p. 8), a definition of reflection that the researchers had adopted for the study. The researchers were interested to find out about the nature and pattern of students' reflection and therefore decided to allow the students to reflect on their teaching as they perceived appropriate. Furthermore, the students were exposed to the idea of reflection, although it was dealt with only briefly and indirectly, both in a course they took in the previous semester entitled "Curriculum and Pedagogy" and in other skills courses in some programs such as Teaching English as a Second Language whereby they were introduced to the idea of "Self-Evaluation" or "*Penilaian Kendiri*" (in Bahasa Malaysia). In addition, the idea of reflection was introduced to the students during the students' micro-teaching and macro-teaching classes that they had in the previous semesters throughout their program of study at the faculty. Thus, the idea of reflection was not a wholly new and alien concept to the students as they entered schools for their teaching practice.

The duration of the teaching practice was approximately 10 weeks for each program. The Diploma Program began from 29 January 2001 to 2 March 2001 for the first phase of the practicum and from 5 March 2001 to 6 April 2001 for the second phase. The Bachelor of Education students began their practice teaching from 19 March 2001 to 13 April 2001 for the first phase and from 16 April to 11 May 2001 for the second phase of the practicum. Both researchers were involved either in the first or second phase of the practicum. In the event that the researchers completed their phases of supervision, the students were requested to continue writing their journals until they completed their practicum and handed in the journal to the researcher at the end of the 10-week practice teaching. Only 30 journals were analysed because some students did not submit their journals on time and there were those who wrote very few entries which had scant information. Furthermore, with the 30 journals there was a total of 875 entries analysed. In writing their journals, the students were given the choice of writing either in Bahasa Malaysia, the national language of the country, or in English, to avoid the problem of language proficiency deterring reflection when they wrote in their journals.

In order to examine the students' perception of journal writing, they were given a 26-question open-ended questionnaire that asked for their opinion and ideas on journal writing. The questions were constructed based on Richards and Lockhart (1997, pp 16-17) guidelines on reflection questions and which mainly focused on events that took place during a lesson. The purpose of the questions was to elicit as much information as possible on students' conception of reflection and of reflective journals.

RESULTS

The 30 journals were divided at random into two piles and each researcher analysed the entries based on the categorisation or types of reflective writing according to Hatton and Smith's identification of types of reflection (see preceding section under Research on the use of journals). The researcher exchanged readings of the journal entries upon completion of the initial group of journals. Each researcher took between 4 to 5 weeks to complete the content analysis of the journal for the different types of writing. All students wrote in Bahasa Malaysia except three students from the Bachelor of Education (TESL) and a student from the Diploma in Education (TESL) who wrote entries in English. The two researchers are bilinguals and teach education courses in Bahasa Malaysia and English and are proficient in both languages. Therefore, both researchers were able to analyse the contents of the journals which were written in either one of the two languages. Initially, the researchers analysed three journals written in Bahasa Malaysia and three in English to determine inter-rater agreement. Because the categorisation followed that of Hatton and Smith's (1995), categorisation was somewhat unproblematic and any differences in perception of categorisation between the researchers was easily resolved through discussion. Each entry in the journals were read and were labelled either as DW (descriptive writing), DR (descriptive reflection), DIAR (dialogic reflection) or CR (critical reflection) based on the characteristics of the different types of reflection as described by Hatton and Smith. There was some overlap in some entries. For instance, an entry for a particular lesson might begin with descriptive writing whereby the writer merely reported the events of the day or the class and later shifted into descriptive reflection and provided rationales or supporting ideas for some events. Some students even moved into dialogic reflection after the initial descriptive writing (See Appendix I for a sample of the different types of reflection).

WHAT ARE THE TYPES OF REFLECTION AS EVIDENCED IN TRAINEES WRITING?

The results of the analysis (see Appendix II) showed that a majority of the entries were of the Descriptive Reflection type (DR), which made up approximately 34 per cent followed by Dialogic Reflection (31%), Descriptive Writing (28%) and finally, Critical Reflection (7%). In the trainees' descriptive reflection, the common focus and concern was on teaching techniques, teaching aids, and classroom management. For instance, a student pointed to the need for her to use a variety of teaching methods because the one she used was not effective and that students differed in learning styles and ability. In another entry, the student stated that because of the lack of laboratory apparatus for Science experiments, students were unable to perform the experiments which could demotivate the students. He rationalised by commenting on the importance of ensuring active participation of students and to create interest in spite of inadequate Science materials. In looking at the entries of the DR type, it seemed that students were merely identifying and stating a problem or an event and consequently providing reasons and rationales to support them. This type of reflection did not provide an in-depth picture of the situation or event although it went a step further than basic reporting of events as in DW.

In our analysis, we found the DIAR type to be rich and revealing of not just of events unfolding in the classroom or school situation, but also of the teacher's awareness of herself or himself as a teacher. In one entry, the trainee lamented on her students' inability to answer the examination

questions because they lacked study skills and were never exposed to test taking strategies. She therefore *mengajar mereka teknik-teknik bagaimana menjawab soalan eseis* [taught them techniques to answer essay questions]. Another trainee reflected on her experience during the 10-week practicum: A teacher's

job is not just to teach ,but more than that. What I have learned during the whole period of the 10 -week practicum is precious to me. As a teacher, I must have the strength and resilience to assist my students to succeed academically and morally.

In one entry, a trainee consciously made a comparison between her past teaching experience as a temporary teacher at a lower secondary school and her present situation teaching at a secondary or high school:

Back then, there was no set induction, but now there is... it was teacher-centred, now it is student-centred. Back then I was dealing with Form I students, now I am dealing with Form Four students who are almost as big as I am. Can I do it?

Similar to Hatton and Smith's finding, students' entries showed limited reflection of the CR type. The main focus of the CR writings is on the events in school and less so on general, out-of-school social issues. In their reflection, the trainees show the attempt to rationalise and to justify issues and actions which demonstrates their awareness of how certain events and behaviours are influenced directly by the school culture and indirectly by society in general. A trainee reflected on the increasing truancy problems in the school and stressed the importance of collaboration between school and parents.

Skipping school is a major disciplinary problem. Occurrence of truancy is increasing especially in urban schools. To solve this problem, schools should not be made the only responsible party. Cooperation from parents is crucial for students to spend more time at home and parents are the ones who really understand their children.

In another entry, the student began with dialogic reflection wherein she mentioned the visit of officials from the District Education Department and observed how this affected the teachers. The teachers were making extra effort to prepare their lessons and had come to school with various teaching aids. And she wrote:

Today I can see that all the teachers enter their classrooms confident and well-equipped...all sorts of AVA were brought into the classes...usually we (teacher trainees) were the only ones doing this...For a teacher to be an effective teacher, preparation before class should be of importance...not only for certain situations...This is because careful preparation determines the smoothness of the process of teaching and learning and at the same time shows the excellent quality of teachers in the eyes of students.

The trainee's colleague at the same school reflected on the same issue.

Today the Director of the Education Department (district) and a number of school heads visited the school. I could see all the teachers were busy at their tasks...scared of being observed (I suppose)...the school seems to be more orderly... not as usual....

In another entry, a trainee observed how the school environment lacked certain elements she thought were conducive to learning.

The conditions and surroundings of school are among factors that the school administration should be concerned with...The positive ambience of school will be able to motivate students to learn in the school. At least, students will be proud to study in a school that is well-known for its beautiful and cheerful surroundings...Indirectly, this factor could influence the students and instil in them the love for their school, which fits the school motto My School, My Heaven.

The limited number of CR type of reflection is similar to that found in Hatton and Smith's study. The trainees seemed to have a tendency to write in the other types of reflection and not reflecting critically. As mentioned by Hatton and Smith, it could be that this type of reflection was more demanding and required knowledge and experience and the awareness of the interplay of various factors that resulted in a particular situation or event. This type of reflection could possibly develop through trainee's teaching experience over time.

WHAT ARE THE STRATEGIES OR STANCES USED BY THE TRAINEES IN WRITING THEIR REFLECTION?

In writing their reflections, the trainees used different stances or writing strategy. A majority of the teacher trainees used the formal personal pronoun 'I' or 'saya' in Bahasa Malaysia (10 trainees) and some used the informal 'I' or 'aku' in Bahasa Malaysia (5 trainees). The four TESL trainees used the English personal pronoun 'I' whereas the rest of the students used the third person 'teacher' or 'guru' in Bahasa Malaysia. Examples of these are as follows.

1. *Pelajar kurang mengingatinya (bahagian anggota badan) dalam bahasa Arab. Jadi saya fikir pelajar perlu di beri peluang masa untuk mengingat.*

(The students could not recall "the parts of the body" in Arabic. Therefore **I** think students need to be given some time to recall.)

2. *Aku lihat, pelajar-pelajar memberi komitmen cuma ada beberapa orang pelajar yang agak nakal tidak mahu membuat perbincangan. Jadi aku telah memarahi dan memberi denda....*

(**I** see that the students are committed except there were a few students who were rather mischievous who refused to discuss/get into the discussion. So **I** scolded them and punished them.)

3. *Guru berasa yakin untuk mengajar pada hari ini.*

(The **teacher** feels confident to teach today.)

Dengan itu, guru akan mengubah teknik itu agar pelajar dapat memahami petikan....

(The **teacher** will change the technique so that the student will understand the excerpt....)

In addition, the trainees who wrote from the first person point of view and those who used the third person 'teacher' or 'guru' in Bahasa Malaysia seemed to have a formal quality to their writing. In particular, trainees who wrote using the third person 'teacher' or 'guru' implied an objective and critical-of-the-self type of writing. Their writing seem to include more criticisms of their lesson implementation. These trainees had more DW and DR types of reflection. Whereas those who wrote their reflections using the informal 'I' in Bahasa Malaysia (*aku*) showed writing which is more personal and dialogic. These mixed writing styles or strategies can have resulted from the trainees' perceptions of the task of reflection. Although there was no attempt on the researchers' part deliberately to instruct the students to write as an academic purpose (to be evaluated), somehow some of the trainees perceived the reflective journals as an academic task. Hatton and Smith, in their research pointed to the idea of dialogic reflection as a possible form of a genre of reflection which could affect the styles of writing. However, in general, whether the students had taken a formal or informal stance to their writing of their reflections, their reflections revealed an in-depth exploration of their classroom practice. Even for those who first began their entries in the DW or descriptive writing type or the DR type, many eventually moved into the DR or DIAR types of reflection as they continued their reflection.

In the overall reflective writings, the main concern of the students seem to be on teaching techniques, in particular, the kinds of teaching aid appropriate for each lesson and classroom management strategies such as coping with disciplinary problems. In addition, increasing the motivation levels of students and low proficiency (especially, in language classes) is a recurring

concern. Problems of feelings of ambivalence and awe of the school culture and administration are also frequently mentioned. In their reflection, the students include writings on the collegial atmosphere or lack of between the school teachers and the trainees, facilities and infrastructure of the schools, the approach to disciplinary problems of students in the schools, and their own proficiency and skills in teaching.

WHAT ARE THE TRAINEES' PERCEPTIONS AND UNDERSTANDINGS OF REFLECTIVE JOURNAL WRITING?

The 30 trainee teachers were also requested to respond to a 26-question survey on their thinking of reflective journal writing (See Appendix III for the questions on the questionnaire). In general, the students provided a positive response to reflective journal writing. An overwhelming majority (90.3%) of the students state that they liked writing a journal. A common response was that reflecting in writing assisted them in evaluating their teaching, in terms of their strengths and weaknesses in conducting lessons in class. Only 910 per cent of the trainees said that they disliked journal writing. The reasons included not knowing how to write a journal and that writing it was done only for self-fulfilment. A majority admitted that writing a reflective journal helped them in their teaching and learning process and that it assisted them in identifying mistakes or weaknesses in their teaching. The trainees considered writing their thoughts on paper about their teaching and the school, to a large extent, as facilitative in

- (a) fulfilling the teaching objectives of a lesson,
- (b) reflecting on the theories they learnt and the applicability and relationship of these theories to actual practice,
- (c) evaluating the teaching aids and methods used,
- (d) evaluating the activities used,
- (e) evaluating teacher-student relationships,
- (f) identifying problems in their teaching,
- (g) solving some problems identified in teaching,
- (h) identifying the successful or unsuccessful aspects of teaching,
- (i) identifying changes that needed to be made in teaching,
- (j) evaluating their approach to the diverse needs of their students,
- (k) improving themselves as a teacher,
- (l) understanding of the teaching and learning process and the curriculum, and
- (m) identifying the characteristics of a good, interesting, creative, and effective teacher.

However, when asked whether reflection helped them in evaluating the decisions they made in their teaching and learning process, only 65 per cent said it did and the remainder either pointed to the rationale that daily lesson plans differed and thus each requires the best of their efforts or some students refrained to comment. Approximately 68 per cent of the students stated that journal writing assisted them in identifying new aspects in their teaching whereas the rest of the students either said they had no comment or were uncertain or that journal writing did not help this part of their teaching. When asked to summarise their experiences and opinion on journal writing, 77 per cent of the students' responses had the following common themes.

1. Helps in the evaluation of teaching methods used -- to determine which is suitable.
2. Assists teachers in identifying their strengths and weaknesses in the process of developing as a teacher.

3. Trains the mind to think before, during and after the teaching and learning process.
4. Helps in identifying problems and solutions related to teaching.
5. Facilitates the process of identifying interesting teaching techniques and activities which could attract students' attention and motivate learning.

The remainder of the students did not respond to the question.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHER EDUCATION

This descriptive study found that in absence of explicit and deliberate instructions of how to write a reflective journal, the majority of the 30 trainee teachers who participated in the study produced journal reflections of the DR, DIAR, DW and CR types of reflection respectively. In writing their reflections, there was a mixed style of writing or of approach to writing. Many of the students wrote using a formal, first person stance using the more formal Bahasa Malaysia 'saya' (I) or the third person 'Guru' (the teacher) rather than the more informal Bahasa Malaysia 'aku' (I). The strategy they used seems to have affected their overall writing of their reflections in that those who used the formal style had more reflection of the DW and DR types in comparison to those who wrote using the informal 'I' (aku) who had more of the DIAR type of reflection. This was supported by Hatton and Smith (1995) who stated that DIAR type, for instance, could entail a specific genre of reflective writing.

Based on the responses on a 26-question questionnaire, the study shows that the 30 trainees found reflective journal writing to be beneficial to teacher development. In general, the consensus is that reflective journal writing assists the novice teacher in evaluating his or her teaching and learning and helps to identify strengths and weaknesses in teaching, which in turn, assists the teacher in discovering a means of correcting and improving his or her teaching.

An implication for teacher education includes the explicit training or development of skills to assist trainee teachers in reflecting upon their practice. Teacher trainees can be exposed to the writing of reflective journals during their coursework at university and to discuss with their peers and lecturers authentic samples of journal entries or reflective journals that they write during their micro or macro teaching courses. Another suggestion is for the trainees to keep a reflective journal during their teaching practice. It can also be in the form of a dialogue journal whereby the supervisor can respond to some entries in the journal.

Another important suggestion is to encourage the use of these journals written during teaching practice in the post-practicum seminars conducted after the teaching practice. At the Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, for instance, trainee teachers enrol for a post-practicum seminar once teaching practice is completed in the preceding semester. However, discussion and deliberation are based only on the trainee teachers' record books which contain a section '*Penilaian Kendiri*' (self evaluation) within each daily lesson plan. However, this self-evaluation is often a brief, superficial account of a particular lesson. Reflection and discussion in the seminar is based on this brief document and on the daily lesson plans. The focus thus inevitably is on the technical parts of teaching and thus focuses on the "efficiency and effectiveness of means to achieve certain ends" (Habermas, 1973 cited in Hatton and Smith, 1995, p. 3).

Teaching can be considered a "profession of conscience". The teacher is accountable not only to his or her students, but also to society in general. It is thus crucial that the teacher is made aware of his or her ways of teaching, strengths and weaknesses and of exploring ways and means to better his or her teaching and learning because one of the important factors to successful teaching is our awareness of our teaching and learning (Freeman, 1989). In telling their stories, the teachers are taking a step towards discovering themselves and of the potential of their teaching and learning. In reflecting on teaching, it "allows us to situate our stories" (Bailey, 1997, p. 2) and

as stated by Freeman (1996, cited in Bailey, 1997, p. 9) "if teaching involves the continual interplay of interpretation and the environment, then its story is complex and subtle, and it is quite complicated to tell." And only teachers, the arbiters of change, can tell the true, complicated story of teaching.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Hamidah Yamat, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, as co-researcher who assisted in the data analysis and preliminary discussion of the research.

REFERENCES

Arredondo, D.E., and Rucinski, T.T. (1994). *Using reflective journals and the workshop approach in university classes to develop students' self-regulated learning*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational research Association, Louisiana, 1994. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED404892)

Bailey, K.M. (1997). Reflective teaching: Situating our stories. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 7, 1-19.

Bean, T.W., and Zulich, J. (1989). Using dialogue journals to foster reflective practice with preservice, content-area teachers. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 16(1), 33-40.

Boud, D., and Walker, D. (1998). Promoting reflection in professional courses: the challenge of context. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23(2), 191-206.

Bray, E. and Harsch, K. (1996). Using reflective journals in Japanese classroom. *The Language Teacher Online*. 1-6.

Cobb, V.L. (1999). *An international comparison of teacher education*. [Online] http://www.ericsp.org/pages/digests/intern_comparison_edu_99-2.html. (ERIC Digests and Publications Digest Number: 1999-2.)

Cobb, V.L., Darling-Hammond, L., and Murangi, K. (1995). *Teacher preparation and professional development in APEC members: An overview of policy and practice*. (ERIC Reproduction Service Number ED 383683) [Online] <http://langue.hyper.chubu.ac.jp/jalt/pub/tlt/96/dec/reflection.html>.

Cook, P.F. and others. (1989). *The effect of structured training vs formal journal writing on quality of teaching performance, and attitudes toward reflective teaching during preservice training*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Northern Educational Research Association, WY, 1989. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 325464)

Cothorn, N.B. (1991). *Seizing the power of personal journal writing*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 340044)

Ferraro, J. (1999). *Reflective practice and professional development*. [Online] http://www.ericsp.org/pages/digests/reflective_practice.html. (ERIC Digests and Publications Digest Number: 00-3)

Farrell, T.S.C. (1999). *Teachers talking about teaching: Creating conditions for reflection*. TESL-EJ. <http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/TESL-EJ/ej14/a1.html>

Freeman, D. (1989). Teacher training, development and decision-making: A model of teaching related strategise for language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 23, 27-45.

Gilmore, F. (1996). *Qualitative research: Written journals within teacher training*. Unpublished manuscript. Christchurch College of Education. Christchurch, New Zealand.

Hammrich, P.L. and others. (1990). *Schema differences among expert and novice teacher in reflection teaching*. (ERIC Document Service No. ED344837)

Hatton, N., and Smith, D. (1995). *Reflection in teacher education: Towards definition and implementation*. Unpublished manuscript. School of Teaching and Curriculum Studies, The University of Sydney, Australia.

Janisek, V. (1999). A journal about journal writing as a qualitative research technique: History, issues and reflections. *Qualitative Inquiry*. 5(4), 505-524.

Kerka, S. (1996). *Journal writing and adult learning*. (ERIC Digests. ERIC Digest No. 174, 1-5. [Online] http://www.ed.gov/databases/ERIC_Digests/ed399413.html.

Kettle, B., and Sellers, N. (1996). The development of student teachers practical theory of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher education*, 12(1), 1-24.

McNamara, M., and Deane, D. (1995). Self-assessment activities: Toward autonomy in language learning. *TESOL Journal*, 4(4), 23-26.

Nunan, D. (1988). *The learner-centered curriculum*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pickett, A. (1999). *Reflective teaching practices and academic skills instruction*. [Online] <http://www.indiana.edu/~1506/pickett.html>.

Rahman, S., Mohd jelas, Z., and Osman, K. (1999). *The conception, perception and the practice of reflective thinking among student teachers*. (Report No. G6/99). Bangi: Fakulti Pendidikan, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Richards, J.C., and Lockhart, C. (1997). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Schon, D. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. Paper presented to the 1987 meeting of the American Educational research Association, Washington, DC, 1-19. Posted by Tom Russell, Queen's University, January, 1998.

Shermis, S.S. (1999). *Reflective thought, critical thinking*. (ERIC Digest No. 143, 1-4.) [Online] http://www.indiana.edu/~eric_rec/ieo/digests/d143.html

Smith, L., and Pape, S.L. (1990). *Reflectivity through journal writing: Student teachers Write about reading methods courses*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Nation, Florida, 1990. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 327498).

Sparks-Langer, G., Simmons, J., Pasch, M., Colton, A., and Starko, A. (1990). Reflective pedagogical thinking: How can we promote it and measure it? *Journal of Teacher Education*, 41(4), 23-32.

Thorpe, D. (1994). Reflective writing as a window on preservice teachers' thought processes. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 10(1), 83-93.

Wellington, B. (1991). The promise of reflective practice. *Educational Leadership*, March, 4-5.

Yinger, R.J. and Clark, C.M. (1981). *Reflective journal writing: Theory and practice*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 208411)

APPENDIX I: TYPES OF REFLECTION

| 1. Descriptive Writing (DR) | | |
|-----------------------------|------------|--|
| Journal No. | Entry Date | Journal Excerpt |
| 027 | 27-3-01 | I finished all the activity that I wanted to do with the students plus yesterday's activity... I also collected the work that they are supposed to pass up today. They were also given homework...to send in ...on Thursday. |
| 004 | 12-3-01 | Teacher feels confident to teach today and careful preparations have been made.. . This type of activity is able to involve students in learning and teaching. The students cooperated well and the teacher is satisfied with the teaching and learning. |
| 037 | 2-2-01 | Today I took the chance to discuss with Ustazah Aminah about the time-table clashes. She is a dynamic lady. My problem with the time-table was solved. |
| 005 | 28-3-01 | Students were able to get a rough idea/ picture of the teaching content to be discussed in today's lesson through the teacher's set induction. Teacher showed pictures of various occupations to the students. The students were able to relate to the topic which is how individuals generate income. |
| 010 | 28-3-01 | The teaching and learning (TandL) process was not able to be conducted because the students were all involved in the special assembly in conjunction with the Prize-giving ceremony for the co-curricular activities. TandL is postponed to another time. |
| 002 | 14-3-01 | The teaching method used using questions and discussion was good and effective and the teaching objectives planned were achieved. At the end of the lesson, students were able to differentiate between the Ifrad Haj, Tamattuk and Qiran and to explain again how each is carried out and including the procedures. |

2. Descriptive Reflection

| Journal No. | Entry Date | Journal Excerpt |
|-------------|-------------------------------|--|
| 006 | 8-3-01 | In this class, there are students who are active and those are passive. To encourage participation of the passive students, the teacher instructed all students to stand and is only allowed to sit when they answer questions asked of them. This strategy seems effective in getting passive students to participate. |
| 011 | 5-2-01 | During the teaching and learning process, some students were cooperative, especially during question and answer session, and when the teacher showed them pictures and charts. A few students were however rather passive. The teacher had to call out their names and to encourage them to answer and gave them low-level questions (knowledge) so that they will have the confidence and the chance to answer some questions.. |
| 027 | 20-3-01 (entry in English) | Today, all of us were assigned to be in charge of the students are sitting for the exams...They were so noisy after the test was over. Thank God I was only there during the test and before the test. Jee...I hate kids!! The first class was also noisy, and they were like circling around me... |
| 018 | 12-3-01 | The creative, critical thinking skills (CCTS) brainstorming and identifying ideas as planned could not be carried out fully. Many of the students waited for answers from the teacher or other students. The teacher needs to add more questions from various cognitive levels to attract students' interest to answer the questions asked and for them to provide substantive ideas. |
| 026 | 21-3-01 | Today the teacher used a game for class activity -- a crossword puzzle to test the previous lesson. Students enjoyed the activity. They could solve all the problems on the crossword puzzle. The teacher could see that through such activities, not only are the students interested, but the teacher could also find out the extent of their understanding of the previous lessons. |
| 007 | 3-4-01 | Today the students are taught a new topic " The role of Faith in Life". As a set induction, the teacher related the topic to the problems of today's youths. The students looked interested and volunteered ideas on problems faced by adolescents and how they are closely related to a person's strength of Faith. All in all, the TandL process proceeded smoothly. |

3. Dialogic Reflection (DIAR)

| Journal No. | Entry Date | Journal Excerpt |
|-------------|-------------------------------|---|
| 010 | 7-2-01 | Teaching 4MS1 Malay Literature. A male student was not attentive while I (<i>aku</i>) teaching. I asked the student why he was not paying attention when I was teaching. His reply was "bored of learning Literature". I was shocked to hear his answer. I retorted "If you are bored why didn't you join the Science class ". According to the student, he had to because he's not eligible for the Science class. I tried to advise him, to give him the will to go on and the realization that Malay Literature is important. However, he seemed uninterested. I am determined to change this student... to like Malay Literature in the duration of my practicum. |
| 024 | 2-2-01 | I (<i>aku</i>) believe that a stern teacher is not the only one who can control a class. It does not mean that students are afraid of us who have a "fierce" character. I know this is my weakness. I am unable to behave in that manner. Maybe that is not my style. Maybe I am more comfortable with an "open" attitude, but at the same time students respect me...It seems... it befits lower secondary students to be treated seriously (stern manner) or firmly if compared to the higher secondary students. We need to be smart...to be able to win their hearts that is enough. If we could get to know them individually. Sometimes I feel it's a lot easier for me to remember the names of those are naughty compared to those who are passive. |
| 030 | 22-2-01 (entry in English) | They had a monthly test today. Lesson started late because they had a seminar at Multimedia University. Some students answered the questions in a short time. Maybe it's too easy for them... maybe its too difficult too, only they know. One big mistake... I didn't put the poem together with the questions...next time don't do it again! |
| 018 | 27-2-01 | The use of the AVA today is less effective and unsatisfactory because the writing was too small and the students at the back of the class could not read the (mahjong paper). Teacher had to read over the writings and to repeat so that the students could write and copy them down. There was also material in the teaching content that was not stated in the teaching objectives. |

| | | |
|-----|---------|---|
| 016 | 25-2-01 | The TandL process today went well. However, it didn't go all too smoothly because the teacher was a bit late to class. This is a situation that should not occur in the teaching profession. The trainee teacher should be more aware and to arrive on time in the future. This should not be repeated. |
|-----|---------|---|

4. Critical Reflection (CR)

| Journal No. | Entry Date | Journal Excerpt |
|-------------|------------|---|
| 001 | 25-2-01 | ...students' attendance is unsatisfactory. A number of students were involved in the parade practice at the school field in conjunction with preparations for the Sports Champion Day SMKTT 2001. The parade practice is disruptive...students could not be attentive in class (the noise). I (<i>saya</i>) warned the students that if they are not interested to study, they can leave the class. Seems after that they gave their attention. I distributed handouts as a teaching aid. |
| 028 | 8-5-01 | Today's lesson is unsatisfactory. There are still students who do not wear sports attire for physical education class. They wasted time lingering in class even though the bell went much earlier. In my opinion, there is no change in attitude for the past 8 weeks. Maybe too little time for me to change their attitudes... their behaviours...of doing whatever they like is difficult for me to change during so short a time I'm here. My hope is that the physical education teachers at this school are able to change their methods/approaches of teaching... and to allow the students to play any PJ games they like. With this attitude change in the teachers, it could help the students to learn a little about what physical education really is. |
| 040 | 6-2-01 | The ratio of Malay and Chinese students in this school is approximately equal. Despite that, the school makes an effort to foster feelings of love for one's country through <i>Malaysia Berjaya</i> (patriotic song). It's uncommon for schools to adopt the song as an official school song for the school assembly. This is very good. |
| 025 | 9-2-01 | Today I found out that there are students among 4ML who do not know how to read and write although they are already in Form 4. Why? The country is so proud of its citizens and moving towards a highly advanced information system. Studies should be conducted and solutions sought, the administrators and teachers are the ones who should be involved in this action research. To assist in the evaluation and reflection of the study, the cooperation of all sectors...the surrounding society is much needed. |
| 030 | 30-4-01 | When entered Form 4A3, the first thing I asked them was how far have they gone in preparing for the exams. I was shocked to hear that they have yet to begin revising for the exams not just for Economics, but for all other subjects. I could recall during my schooldays, I had to begin revision work the latest 2 weeks before the paper (exam). What seems to be the problem with students these days? Is it the school environment, education system, or teachers the cause of this situation? Or is it because they are "labelled" 4A3 that causes them to feel inferior and thus refuse to make an effort for success because success seems impossible for them. Whatever the reason, I am still going to help them during and after school hours. I encourage students to come in groups or individually if they have any problems related to the subject (Economy) |

APPENDIX II: PERCENTAGES OF TYPES OF REFLECTION

| Type of Reflection | Frequency of Type of Reflection | Percentage |
|--------------------|---------------------------------|-------------|
| (a) DW | 244 | 28% |
| (b) DR | 299 | 34% |
| (c) DIAR | 273 | 35% |
| (d) CR | 59 | 7% |
| TOTAL | 875 | 100% |

APPENDIX III: SAMPLE QUESTIONS ON THE QUESTIONNAIRE

- Q1: Do you like writing this journal?
- Q2: Does journal writing help in the teaching and learning process?
- Q3: Does journal writing help in improving/upgrading/developing yourself as a teacher?
- Q4: Why do you write a reflective journal apart from writing as an assignment?

Q5: Does journal writing help in:

- (a) identifying what is to be taught?
- (b) fulfilling your teaching objectives?
- (c) assessing what you have learnt and practiced?
- (d) evaluating the teaching aids you used?
- (e) evaluating the teaching methods that you used?
- (f) evaluating the activities that you have chosen?
- (g) evaluating your teacher-student relationship?
- (h) identifying any problems in your teaching?
- (i) evaluating the problem-solving method you used in the teaching and learning process?
- (j) evaluating the decision-making in the teaching and learning process?
- (k) identifying the successful aspects in your teaching?
- (l) identifying the unsuccessful aspects of your teaching?
- (m) identifying new aspects in your teaching?
- (n) identifying changes that you need to make in your teaching?
- (o) evaluating your way of meeting different student needs?

Q6: Does journal writing help you in:

- (a) improving/developing yourself as a teacher?
- (b) identifying your strengths/positive attributes as a teacher?
- (e) © identifying your weaknesses as a teacher?
- (c) determining how far you have succeeded as a teacher?
- (d) developing your understanding/philosophy of teaching and learning processes and of the curriculum?
- (e) identifying the characteristics of a good, interesting, creative and effective teacher?

Q7: Summarize your experience and opinion on journal writing.